

Is The Source Of Qur'an 18:60-65 The Epic of Gilgamesh?

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Assalamu-`alaykum wa rahamatullahi wa barakatuhu:

1. Introduction

18.60: Behold, Moses said to his attendant, "I will not give up until I reach the junction of the two seas or (until) I spend years and years in travel."

18.61: But when they reached the Junction, they forgot (about) their Fish, which took its course through the sea (straight) as in a tunnel.

18.62: When they had passed on (some distance), Moses said to his attendant: "Bring us our early meal; truly we have suffered much fatigue at this (stage of) our journey."

18.63 He replied: "Sawest thou (what happened) when we betook ourselves to the rock? I did indeed forget (about) the Fish: none but Satan made me forget to tell (you) about it: it took its course through the sea in a marvellous way!"

18.64 Moses said: "That was what we were seeking after:" So they went back on their footsteps, following (the path they had come).

18.65 So they found one of Our servants, on whom We had bestowed Mercy from Ourselves and whom We had taught knowledge from Our own Presence.

The Holy Qur'an 18:60-65

The "junction of the two waters" and the mysterious "servant of God" are two points that Arent Wensinck connects to the Epic of Gilgamesh as the source of the Qur'an. The Epic of Gilgamesh was written in cuneiform tablets about 2000 BCE. The tablets were found by Sir Austen Layard were and were deciphered in 1873 by the English Assyriologist George Smith:

GILGAMESH EPIC,

an important Middle Eastern literary work, written in cuneiform on 12 clay tablets about 2000 bc . This heroic poem is named for its hero, Gilgamesh (fl. about 2700-2650 bc), a tyrannical Babylonian king who ruled the city of Uruk, known in the Bible as Erech (now Warka, Iraq). According to the myth, the gods respond to the prayers of the oppressed citizenry of Uruk and send a wild, brutish man, Enkidu, to challenge Gilgamesh to a wrestling match. When the contest ends with neither as a clear victor, Gilgamesh and Enkidu become close friends. They journey together and share many adventures. Accounts of their heroism and bravery in slaying dangerous beasts spread to many lands.

When the two travelers return to Uruk, Ishtar (guardian deity of the city) proclaims her love for the heroic Gilgamesh. When he rejects her, she sends the Bull of Heaven to destroy the city. Gilgamesh and Enkidu kill the bull, and, as punishment for his participation, the gods doom Enkidu to die. After Enkidu's death, Gilgamesh seeks out the wise man Utnapishtim to learn the secret of immortality. The sage recounts to Gilgamesh a story of a great flood (the details of which are so remarkably similar to later biblical accounts of the flood that scholars have taken great interest in this story). After much hesitation, Utnapishtim reveals to Gilgamesh that a plant bestowing eternal youth is in the sea. Gilgamesh dives into the water and finds the plant but later loses it to a serpent and, disconsolate, returns to Uruk to end his days.

This saga was widely studied and translated in ancient times. Biblical writers appear to have modeled their account of the friendship of David and Jonathan on the relationship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu. Numerous Greek writers also incorporated elements found in the Gilgamesh epic into their dragon-slaying epics and into stories concerning the close bond between Achilles and Patroclus.^[1]

In the Epic of Gilgamesh, Gilgamesh seeks out Utnapishtim, an immortal being who lives at the mouth of the rivers:

Overcome with melancholy at the death of his friend Engidu, the hero Gilgamesh sets out on a series of travels to look for ancestor Utnapishtim (Khasisatra, Xisouthros) who lives at the mouths of rivers and who has been given eternal life. Gilgamesh wants to ask him about the plant of life which will save the man from the power of death.^[2]

In his article on "Al-Khadir" in the Encyclopaedia Of Islam.^[3] (First Edition, 1927, Volume II and reprinted in the second editions in 1978) Wensinck connects Utnapishtim as the figure behind the mysterious "servant of God" in the Qur'an 18:65, and "junction of the two rivers" or *madjma` al-bahrayn* in Qur'an 18:60-61 as the "mouth of the rivers" in the Gilgamesh Epic. But Wensinck expresses doubts regarding these connections. The companion of Moses seems to have no connection with the Gilgamesh Epic:

The figure of the travelling companion is not connected with the Gilgamesh epic where it is not found, but with the Alexander romance and the Jewish legend.^[4]

And equating the *madjma` al-bahrayn* or "junction of the two seas (or rivers)" with Gilgamesh's "mouth of the rivers" has no connection either:

The *maḍjma` al-bahrayn* is given as the goal of the journey. The expression has no direct original either in the epic or the romance, although there are points of contact in both. Utnapishtim lives *ina pi narati*, i.e., at the mouth of the river. It is not quite certain what the expression means, but it is probable that the place in the extreme west is meant where the sources of all running water are. This, however, still leaves the dual in the Qur'anic expression unexplained.^[5]

It is clearly seen that Wensinck himself has serious doubts about a clear connection between the Gilgamesh Epic and the Qur'an yet Torrey^[6] and Ibn Warraq^[7] have claimed, on the authority of Wensinck, that Qur'an 18:60-65 did indeed originate from the Gilgamesh Epic.

2. What Is The Alleged Source Of Qur'an 18:60-65: The Gilgamesh Epic Or Alexander Stories?

Earlier scholarship has identified and discussed numerous parallels that exist between the Epic of Gilgamesh and the Alexander stories.^[8] Wensinck, however, identifies specific elements in Qur'an 18:60-65 as being from the Epic of Gilgamesh but not from the Alexander stories such as "the junction of the two seas (or rivers)" and the supposedly immortal "servant of God" in Qur'an 18:65. Commenting on the explanations provided by Wensinck on 18:60-65, Wheeler states:

As with Wensinck's other explanations of these verses, the relation he sees to the Epic of Gilgamesh is not based on Q 18:60-65 alone but on the information attributed to these verses in the commentaries. Granting, for the moment, that Wensinck does not make this distinction between the sources and granting that the commentaries give no indication of being aware of the Epic of Gilgamesh, it is still unclear why the Gilgamesh and Alexander stories would be conflated in Q 18:60-65.^[9]

2.1 Immortality

Wensinck also draws parallels between the Gilgamesh Epic and the Alexander Stories. Wensinck states that in both the Epic of Gilgamesh and the Alexander stories the hero goes on a quest to gain immortality. Immortality is found at a water source in both accounts and in both the water source is associated with an immortal being with whom the heroes of the stories interact. In the Epic of Gilgamesh, Utnapishtim and his wife are said to have been granted immortality by the gods. The source of immortality for Gilgamesh is a plant at the bottom of the sea. In other Alexander stories, it is Alexander's cook^[10] who attains immortality and in one case it is Alexander's daughter^[11] who becomes immortal by drinking from the water of life. Comparing the two stories, Wheeler says:

Despite these broad similarities, it is difficult to equate these two stories beyond the observation that they share certain elements, elements which appear in many other stories.^[12]

What about the issue of the immortal being found in the Qur'an? Does this have a parallel in the Gilgamesh Epic or the Alexander stories? The Epic of Gilgamesh provides in Utnapishtim a clear example of an immortal being who has esoteric knowledge of the gods. Gilgamesh, like Moses who comes to al-Khidr in the commentaries on the Qur'an 18:60-82, comes to Utnapishtim in search of the meaning of his friend Enkidu's seemingly unjust death.

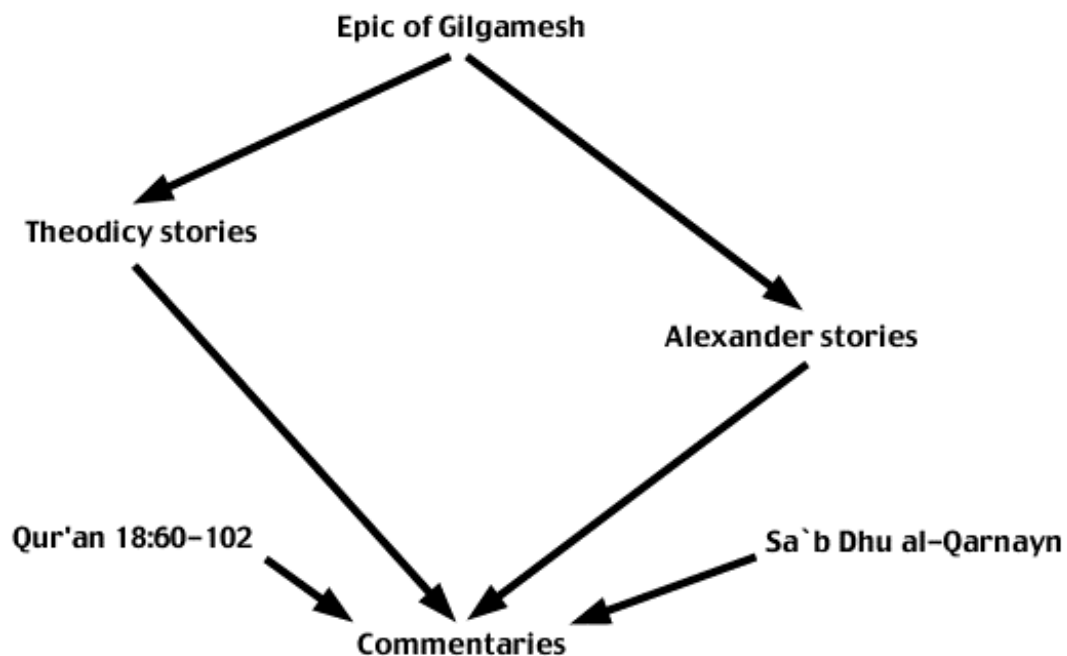
In order to draw a parallel between Utnapishtim and al-Khidr, Lidzbarski had claimed that the name al-Khidr was a jumbled form of the Sumerian name of Utnapishtim, "Ziusudra", and it is transcribed in German as "Chasisadra".^[13] In the Alexander stories, however, it is unclear which character should be identified as the parallel of Utnapishtim and al-Khidr.

The versions of Alexander stories that have been influenced by the Qur'anic commentaries on 18:60-82 depict al-Khidr as the immortal being. In the Greek recension b and in the sermon of Jacob of Serugh, Alexander is led into the land of darkness by an (wise) old man. In the land of darkness, both the stories say that it was the cook who discovered the water of life and becomes immortal with the fish. Thus a combination of these two different characters from the Alexander stories, the wise man and the immortal man, that parallels closely the model of the wise and immortal Utnapishtim in the Gilgamesh Epic.

There are other problems with Wensinck's contention that both Gilgamesh and Alexander go on a quest to gain immortality. As Wheeler has correctly noted, it is an over implication of the two stories by Wensinck.^[14] In the Epic of Gilgamesh, the cause of Gilgamesh's journey in search of Utnapishtim is Enkidu's seemingly unjust death. Gilgamesh travels through the gate at the Mashu mountains, and for twelve leagues through the land of darkness, until he arrives at a garden in which gems grow by the edge of the sea. Gilgamesh meets a young woman called Sidduri in the garden. Sidduri tells Gilgamesh about Urshanabi, who might ferry Gilgamesh across of the sea to Utnapishtim. Gilgamesh and Sidduri travel together for three days and meet Utnapishtim and his wife at Dilmun. Utnapishtim tell Gilgamesh two secrets of the gods: the story of the flood and a story about the existence of a plant at the bottom of the sea which restores men to their youth. Gilgamesh retrieves the plant, but on his return to his home in Uruk to share the plant with his companions, a snake eats the plant.

As for the quest of immortality in the Alexander stories, it is important to note that not all of the versions describe Alexander's quest for immortality at the water of life. The themes of the quest for immortality in *later* Greek, Persian and Ethiopic recensions are different.^[15]

Based on this evidence, Wheeler comes to the conclusion that it was not Qur'an 18:60-82 that had borrowed from the Epic of Gilgamesh. Rather it was the Qur'anic commentaries that used the elements present in the Epic of Gilgamesh which surfaced in the Alexander stories along with the stories associated with the Sa'b Dhul-Qarnayn to explain the Qur'an 18:60-82. He depicts it pictorially as:^[16]



Stressing the difference between **the Qur'an and the Qur'anic commentaries** that use the the elements present of the Epic of Gilgamesh that surface in the Alexander stories, Wheeler adds that:

Instead of considering the Epic of Gilgamesh and Alexander stories as being confused in the Qur'an, along with a number of theodicy stories, it is preferable to uncover how and to what end the commentaries make use of elements of these earlier stories in their interpretation of Q 18:60-102. By interpreting Q 18:60-102 in light of these extra-Qur'anic stories, the commentators are able to show how Islam includes earlier stories and revelations. This approach, on the one hand, allows the commentaries to contend that these earlier stories are part of the revelation included in the Qur'an. On the other hand, the commentaries are in a position to claim that their interpretations of the Qur'an are necessary in order to understand the rich and comprehensive character of what would otherwise be enigmatic passages. Keeping in mind the distinction between Q 18:60-102 and the commentaries on these verses, it is possible to begin to uncover not the sources for the Qur'an, but the sources to which the commentaries make allusions in their interpretations of the Qur'an.^[17]

2.2 The Junction Of The Two Waters

Wensinck has already admitted that there is no connection between the *madjma` al-bahrayn* or "junction of the two seas (or rivers)" with Gilgamesh's "mouth of the rivers" or with the Alexander stories. Let us summarise the issue of the waters and the difference between the various accounts:^[18]

- **In the Epic of Gilgamesh** Utnapishtim is said to reside at the "mouth of the waters." The Akkadian phrase *ina pi narati* has also been understood to mean the "head of the waters," signifying the junction and source of the waters flowing from Dilmun, the Sumerian equivalent of the Garden of Eden. Both of these water sources are associated, in different contexts, with the Garden of Eden, although in the Epic of Gilgamesh the water at the "mouth of the waters" is not considered to grant immortality.
- **In the Alexander stories** the water is supposed to be located at or flow from a

source in the Garden of Eden.

- **In the Qur'anic commentaries**, the expression *madjma` al-bahrayn* ("the junction of the two waters") is understood in variety of ways. Some of them contain *allusions* to elements from the Gilgamesh Epic and Alexander stories; some consider it to be the meeting place of Mediterranean Sea (i.e., "Roman" Sea) and Indian Ocean (i.e., "Persian" Sea). The meeting place of the two waters was identified with the "Garden of Eden". Is this from the commentaries or opinions?

Wheeler says that the Qur'anic exegesis were not familiar with the name of Gilgamesh, though they were familiar with certain elements of the Gilgamesh story, notably Gilgamesh's journey to Utnapishtim. It is possible that in late antiquity and beyond, the Gilgamesh story was known through the medium of the Alexander stories and that the figure of Alexander represented Gilgamesh.^[19]

3. Conclusions

It was claimed by Wensinck that specific elements in Qur'an 18:60-65 were borrowed from the Epic of Gilgamesh such as the "meeting place of the two waters" and the supposedly immortal "servant of God". Wheeler pointed out that the connection seen by Wensinck are not based on Qur'an 18:60-65 but on the information attributed to these verses in the Qur'anic commentaries.

Wensinck does not make any distinction between the Qur'an and its commentaries. The commentaries give no indication of being aware of the Epic of Gilgamesh. It is most likely that the Qur'anic commentaries used elements present in the Epic of Gilgamesh (which surfaced in the Alexander stories) along with the stories associated with the Sa`b Dhul-Qarnayn to explain Qur'an 18:60-82.

References & Notes

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- [14] B. M. Wheeler, "Moses Or Alexander? Early Islamic Exegesis Of Qur'an 18:60-65", *Journal Of Near Eastern Studies*, *op cit.*, p. 206.
- [15] *ibid.*, pp. 206-207.
- [16] *ibid.*, p. 208.
- [17] *ibid.*
- [18] *ibid.*, pp. 208-209.
- [19] *ibid.*, p. 210.

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